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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine how effectively children write when motivated by viewing a work of art and what kind of art they would choose most frequently for motivation. A group of 55 students from second, fourth, and eighth grade classrooms were selected to respond to reproductions of familiar paintings with either fictional or factual writing. After an introductory session during which the students discussed and wrote about a teacher-selected painting, students were free to select pictures of their choice from a group of 15 reproductions. The most frequently chosen piece was a realistic painting called "The Country School" by Winslow Homer. Since students were not questioned as to their reasons for choosing their pictures, the results of the study were inconclusive. (Extensive samples of student writing are included.) (AEA)

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GREAT ART LEADS TO JOYFUL WRITING*

by
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Everywhere we look there are visual messages. Indeed, a recent estimate is that over 80% of the information we process comes to us through our eyes.[1] Art educators are among those concerned about the lack of visual literacy education in the schools. Most of us can physically receive images, yet how effectively do we truly see?

Clearly one part of a child's education should be concerned with educating the eye. Visual education can be integrated into the language arts, particularly in the composition strand of elementary programs. Despite the plethora of visual stimuli we receive, there is little information about how teachers of writing can make use of these visual images.

Such writers as Donald Graves[2] have emphasized the importance of having children draw first, and then write about what they have drawn. Other writers, like Hennings and Grant,[3] and Hillocks,[4] have told of the value in having children write about realistic photographs. Yet we need not be limited to these two sources for educating the eye, and motivating writing.

There exists another vast source of material, reproductions of artists paintings. Only a few authors have described the uses of such reproductions as stimulus to writing. Wiener,[5] in his otherwise very comprehensive book, devotes a brief paragraph to the topic, suggesting paintings by Rockwell, Wyeth and Degas. Esbensen[6] recommends paintings as a stimulus to poetry writing.

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*A speech given at the Twelfth Annual National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School, San Antonio, Texas, March 22, 1980.

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Despite these scattered suggestions, a comprehensive description of the relation between artists' paintings and children's writing is not available. Because of this, we undertook some modest experimentation. Our purpose was to begin finding answers to two questions:

1. How effectively can children write when the motivation is a reproduction of a painting?
2. From an array of such pictures, which will be most frequently chosen as a motivation to write?

The materials used were large mounted reproductions of paintings by famous artists. To try the motivation and gather the writing samples, we worked in three classrooms. The second-grade room had fifteen children, the fourth grade grade had thirteen, and the eigth grade had twenty-seven. Thus a total of 55 children were involved in responding to the reproductions.

In each classroom the procedure was the same. The teacher presented one of the sample illustrations to the total group. Children were encouraged to talk about the picture, describing what they saw, and sharing their reactions. Then, children either dictated a group fictional story about the picture, or wrote an individual story. Second, the other sample picture was presented, followed by group discussion. Children then either dictated a factual descriptive piece about that picture, or wrote an individual composition.

Following this, the other pictures were available in the room. Children were free to go to the pictures, select one they liked, and write about it. Before they began, children were reminded they could write either a fictionalized story, or a factual descriptive piece about any of the pictures they chose. Teachers made some additional writing time available during the experiment, so children would not choose a picture simply because it was the only one available at the particular time they chose to write.

The first sample painting was by the Impressionist, Pierre Auguste Renoir, born in 1841.*[7] Possessed with an absorbing interest in the human figure, Renoir took sheer delight in unaffected feinine charm. An innate love of color is coupled in his painting with a solidity of figures. Second graders studied "Girl With a Watering Can;" and dictated the following group story:

> Once there was a little girl. Her name was Carol. She had blond hair. She was impossible! She sticks out her tongue at her Mom! She's always running away from home! She hits her dad! She hates her mom!
>
> One day she bought a red ribbon and she tried to strangle somebody. And somebody tried to strangle her back. That didn't kill her so she bought a present for her grandmother. It was a pop-up snake in a box, and it scared her grandmother out of her wits. Then the little girl went home and cried. Then she got punished.
>
> That's why she's impossible.

After a similar introduction to the painting in the fourth grade, Katy wrote this description:

> There is a girl standing in a garden. She has blond, curly hair and blue eyes. She is standing on a dustry path holding a blue watering can and some flowers. In her hair is a bright, red bow. She is wearing a navy blue dress with white lace trimming. The girl is wearing white socks and navy blue shoes with bright blue buttons.
>
> Behind her there is lush green grass. There were rosebushes with blossoms of bright red and a peachy pink color. Farther on there is a bright green bush. A little farther on there is a rose-bush with three roses on it. Two are red, one is white.

The second-grade class dictated a descriptive piece about "The Blue Horses,"[8] by the German Expressionist painter, Franz Marc. Born in 1880, Marc studied human and animal anatomy in Paris, and is best known for animal studies. After viewing this painting, the children dictated the following:

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*This speech was originally presented with slides. For readers who wish to look at the paintings while reading stories motivated by them, sources are indicated where possible.

We see blue horses. The sky is red. The grass is green. The horses are eating on a white tusk. The sky looks like blood. The sky is also blue--light blue. The orange sun is on the ground. The sun is boiling into the earth. The horses are very round. Their heads are ovals. The tusk looks like a wishbone or a giant sparerib. The grass is like straight lines. The hills look like the round part of our planet earth.

The fourth- and eigth-grade classes also wrote imaginative fiction pieces about this painting. Laura, a fourth-grade student, composed the following:

There were once five splotches of blue paint. They lived in Ancient Rome. They were so very unhappy because nobody liked them because they were different. One day a fairy polkadot came and granted them a wish. "You may be any kind of animal you want, but you have to earn it by putting effort into being that animal!" she said as she faded away. The third splotch suggested to act like the animal. So they all picked one animal and it happened that they all wanted to be horses. So that afternoon they went up a hill trying to make a galloping. "This is a nice place," said one of the splotches. They all started chomping on the grass. The splotches heard someone coming so they tried to impress them by standing like horses with a mouth full of hay and grass. It was the King. "My!" said the King, "What lovely horses!" Their wish was granted.

After these introductory experiences, children chose a painting and wrote about it. The paintings are presented in ascending order, from least frequently to most frequently chose. Two paintings were written about by only one child. The first, "The White Clown," is by Walt Kuhn, an American painter born in 1880. Kuhn's work is characterized by a simplification of the figures into a few essential, related planes. About this particular painting, one eighth-grade child wrote:

This hulk of a man is a prisoner during World War I. He is sitting in a dirty dungeon on an old crate. He is planning his escape route in a slouched position. His knees are bent, with his elbows rested on them and hands clasped together. The dirt and sweat from his body and dungeon walls show up clearly on his dull, white prisoner outfit which he was forced to wear. His fingers are red and sore from scratching on the dungeon walls. His hair was shaved off and all that remains is his thick, yellow scalp.

As you can see, this man is doomed for life, and so are those who join him.

by Carmen

The other painting chosen by only one child is entitled "The Campers." By the French painter Ferdinand Leger, an associate of Picasso, this is characterized by Leger's usual hard, machine-like precision. Born in 1881, this artist espoused synthetic cubism, in which brilliant color was used boldy to create surfaces that are richly varied. Chris, a fourth-grade girl, chose the painting as a stimulus to her writing, though the relation between the visual and the written expression seem tangential.

> There was a family of five. There was a father, mother, older sister, and two twin boys. The father's name was Joseph, the mother's name was Mary, the sister's name was Esther, and the twin boys' names were Mark and Luke. All of their names are from the Biblical times. When Joseph was younger, he found a girl he loved. Her name was Mary. They decided to get married. They chose to get married on Christmas Day. After they got married they noticed that their names were Jesus' mother's and father's names. So they decided to name their children from the Biblical times, also.
>
> Many people thought this was weird. But they were serious. When they went to restaurants they had to tell the people that worked there their names so they could get a table. People laughed at them, but they didn't care. They knew that God loved them, so they didn't care what people said about them.

Two paintings by Pablo Picasso were included in this experiment, and each was written about by only two children. The first, entitled "Bacchanal," is typical of Picasso's work. His paintings, done in Paris, showed startling shifts from one sort of visualization to another. The constant experimentation is typical of this Spanish native, and his followers. About "Bacchanal," Ann wrote:

> Once upon a time there was a world that has blue skies, and brown and white people that have trumpets in the dark. Blue fireworks are smashing. The ground is brown. There is a little black in the sky. The brown and white people are sitting by the railroad track. A black tree is way down by their house. After they play their trumpet, they will go to bed.

In contrast, Jill, an eighth grader, wrote the following dramatic interpretation of the visual message:

> Two musicians amidst a desert of barren desolation, interweaving their song with the shadows of the mountains and the crystalline sky, while the silent sea laps ever ominously upon the sands of the island, creating an atmosphere of watchfulness. The air is surcharged with the hysteria of two men, neither hearing nor heeding the song of the pipes, venting their violent grief upon each other in helpless confusion and fear.

The other Picasso painting, "Two Acrobats with a Dog," illustrates well the amazing diversity which characterizes his work. In choosing to write about this painting, Katy, an eighth-grade student, assumed the persona of one of the characters:

> I bet you don't know us. Nobody knows us. And if anybody does, they regret it sooner or later. People think we're sick or we are crazy goons, but we aren't. We don't live anyplace really. We roam the hills with our dog Scratch. You don't have to know us. I know we scare you. We don't need anyone. We'll go somplace else.

Mark, a boy in Katy's class, chose to write an observer's view of the characters.

> This is Hans and Franz and their dog Septic. They are walking home on this gray October day after a very hard-working time at the Milestone Circus.
>
> Hanz and Franz are dressed in their only clothes (their acrobatic clothes). Hanz with his stretchy odd color diamond pants and coal black loaders and diamond shirt with a pink scarf around his pale neck stood about 6'6" tall. Frank with his sea blue suit and pink socks stands about 4'11". Hanz works as hard as a bull to raise enough money to get their food and accessories for them to use because their mom and dad died in a dreadful bloody accident about a month ago. They try to take very good care of their dog Septic because his short gray fur reminds them of their parents. They are as sad as bloodhounds because they can't make a good living except for their high-flying job in the circus.
>
> In the sack that Hanz carries around, they keep their dog food for Septic and also for them. They have just enough food to feed a mouse and sometimes they have to eat their dog's food. Well, Hanz and Franz and Septic have to go to their wreck of yellow brick that they call home and will have to eat as fast as pigs to get back to the circus on time.

Four paintings were chosen by three children each. The first is by the French artist, Edward Manet, born in 1832. "The Boaters," is characteristic of Manet's work, which shocked the academic painters popular at this time, because of his subject matter. Manet demonstrated a healthy interest in everyday life around him. He found himself the object of scorn because he used ideas from the real world, depicted in brilliant colors. Jenny, a fourth-grade child, moved away from the picture itself to describe an incident which could have happened to one of the characters. She wrote:

> A man and a woman are sitting by the river. These two people are in England and sitting by the "Thames" river. The month is November, right after the hurricane season. This man has just gotten back from a long journey at sea.
>
> During the voyage he and his shipmates ran into a hurricane! The waves were getting huge, at least 20 feet high!!! The boat was beginning to sink!!! "Get out the pumps," yelled the captain, but the pumps were already out. After 20 minutes the ship was sinking rapidly! "Get out the lifeboats and put on the life preservers!!!!"
>
> Already fifteen men had been swept overboard with the waves. One of them was a poor sailor, named Jack. Jack had a life preserver on. Jack kept sight of his friends in the waves for only a few seconds, and then he went under. But he didn't stay under for long because the life preserver pushed him up to the surface. Then Jack started swimming. He swam all night and in the morning the storm had subsided. In the morning he came across the dead body of his best friend, Bill, floating in the water.
>
> Jack felt very depressed so he stopped swimming. He was so depressed at the death of his friend, Bill, that he didn't see the large mass of land ahead of him. After awhile he saw it and started to pull his dead friend, Bill, to land. When he reached the shore he could give his friend, Bill, a proper funeral.
>
> After about two miles of swimming, Jack reached his homeland. When he reached the shore, he left his friend, Bill, on the beach and went to tell everybody that he was home. After awhile, he went to Bill's wife's house and broke the sad news to her. After a proper funeral, Jack and his wife sat by the river and Jack told his wife about his adventures. And that is where you see them now.

Judy, an eighth-grade writer, focused on the relation between the two characters, and included an interesting remembered incident from a previous time.

> John and Jenny have been going together for two years. They first met when John was getting his sailboat ready for a peaceful ride on the quiet lake and Jenny was taking a stroll on the pier. She started to admire his work and he noticed her. She quickly turned her head and then began to watch him from the corner of her eye. He asked her if she would like to go for a ride. She blushed, lowered her head, and quietly accepted. He held her hand as she stepped into the boat.
>
> "This is a lovely boat," she whispered.
>
> "Thank you," he replied as they rowed off into the calm wake.
>
> They were gone for almost an hour and the wind began to pick up. They soon appeared on the horizon like a tiny nail in a blank wall. They reached the pier and he helped her out.
>
> As her foot touched the rough wood, she remembered the times when she was a little girl and she walked on the pier in her bare feet and would get splinters. She also remembered the loud shrieking screams that were heard when her mother pulled them out.
>
> "Thank you," she muttered. "I really enjoyed the ride."
>
> "You look a little green around the gills," he said. "Would you like to sit down?"
>
> "Yes," she replied while holding her hand to her stomach.
>
> He led her to the railing on the pier. It squeaked as they sat down.
>
> From then on, John and Jenny went for boat rides every day and every day they would sit on that same railing that squeaked every time they sat down.

A second painting chosen by three children is Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte" (Muller, p. 50). Born in 1859, Seurat carried the work of the Impressionists to its final conclusion. While they were interested in the breaking-up of surfaces by light, Seurat completely dissolved form by representing it with tiny round dots of color of equal size. The

technique was as severely disciplined and painstaking as its predecessor Impressionism was spontaneous and exhuberent. Only eight-grade boys and girls wrote about this particular painting. The following, by Bridget, is typical of the descriptive material most children composed.

> This is a picture of a very clean and tidy park. A lot of fancy rich people come here. The kind that would own a mansion and wear long dresses. Their tiny children came along with them. The children looked like their elders. The gentlemen were dressed in tuxedos, very energetic ones, and the ladies were dressed in long, lustrous dresses. The gentlemen had elaborate pipes and walked with lumpy canes. The ladies also had exuberant umbrellas.
>
> The perfect park is surrounded by trees like an animal in a cage. The fall leaves look like they were olive brown, gray, green, and yellow mixed. It looks like all the ingredients that you put in a cake mix. The grass is dark green under the tall trees, and light brown in the shining sun.

A third painting which attracted three child writers is "I and the Village,"[9] by the Russian surrealist Marc Chagall. Born in 1887, this painter evoked the magic of the subconscious and the dream world by combining fragments of reality in seemingly unrelated ways. David, a second grader, wrote a minimal description, including an opening evaluative comment:

> It's weird. A man loves a horse. A woman is milking a cow. The woman is wearing a necklace. The man is wearing a hat. There is a tree and a town.

In contrast, a fourth-grade child combines both description and minimal plot development:

> Once upon a time in a far, far, far, far away planet there was a city that was all confused. It was so confusing when you were there, you couldn't make out a thing. A sheik was standing with a postman's hat. He was holding something like a Christmas tree, but it was a small one. A girl was standing on her head. In that city, the colors were very dull. They were purple, yellow, white, and red. One day a deep space probe landed on that planet. The landing pad was a house. Inside the probe was Colonel Buck Rogers from New Chicago. Also inside was his small companion, Twiki. When they got out, Twiki said, "What a mess, Buck." All the people from that planet thought that they were weird. They decided that they were weird themselves. They changed their costumes and became normal.
>
> by Louise

The American Robert Henri painted "Skipper Mick," written about by three children. Born in 1865, Henri was a rebel against the heavily "Europeanized" studio art of his time. His paintings are characterized by strong contrasts in brushwork which create vigorous differences in values. About "Skipper Mick," one eighth-grade child wrote:

> This is a painting of a small boy. He has on a greenish colored pullover shirt with three silver buttons on top. It is hanging out, untucked, over his pants. Around his neck he has a bright red scarf which sticks out of the front of his shirt between the buttons. He has chubby cheeks that are of a rose color. His nose is red and pudgy. His beady little eyes are a light shade of blue having a distinguished look in them, as if he were thinking about something. He has short stringy hair with a slight curl in it. It is a shade of reddish brown. It is covered by a brown cap which is slanted a bit sideways, with one pinkish colored ear sticking out. He has his left hand shoved in the pocket of his dusty brown pants.
>
> by Michelle

In contrast to that very complete description of the contents of the painting, Lisa wrote an equally completely-developed persona for the young boy.

> This is Hans. He lives in East Berlin. He speaks German and very little English. He looks like a little boy who has just come in from the cold winter weather. His cheeks are as red as apples. His nose looks like a big shiny cherry.
>
> He goes to school in the nearby neighborhood. He works on arithmetic, reading, and most of all, Hans likes to learn about the Bible. Someday he would like to be a priest.
>
> He looks like a very deep emotional person by his blue eyes. The certain glare in Hans' eye makes him seem eager to do things.
>
> Hans has an average family. His Mother, Anja, his Father, Ralph; his brothers Peter and Alois. His sisters, Inga, Helga, and Heidi.
>
> He helps out around the house. If not doing his studies, he milks the cows or he takes the sheep up to the mountains.
>
> Hans likes the outdoors. He likes to ride in the fields on his horse "Skipper Mick." He got the name from his uncle, who is a sailor. On Sundays before church, he picks a bouquet of flowers called Edelweiss for his mother.
>
> If you can't tell--"Hans is a German Boy!"

The next two paintings were chosen by four children each. The first, "Umbrellas in the Rain,"[10] is by Maurice Prendergast, a contemporary of Robert Henri. Though the two artists are grouped in the same school of painting, this painting makes apparent why Prendergast is considered a luminist, an artist especially concerned with the effects of light on color. About this painting, Kristine, a second grader, dictated a quite complete description of what she saw:

> It was a rainy day out and a lot of people were waiting at the palace. Almost all the people had umbrellas. There were ladies and men. There are a lot of puddles. Some ladies were in their best dresses and holding them up so they wouldn't fall in the puddles. Some people who had hats on didn't have umbrellas because their hats had a big rim on them and since they didn't have dresses on they had to tuck their pants into their boots. It seems like there's mostly ladies because there is a ball. And there are guards for the ball and it seems like the ball just opened.

Kris, the eight-grade author of the next writing, assumes the personality of one of the characters.

> Well, here I am soaked from the cool rain that is falling from the clouds as black as the coal to steam a train. My mother is way ahead of me waiting to get in this gigantic marblestone building. I don't think she cares about me because she always leave me behind. Maybe I should run away. I know they say the world is cruel and insane, but I don't think it's so bad. In fact, I kind of like it.
>
> Just think, if I would run away, my mother would be as frantic as a cat thrown in a pool of water. My father would race to the police and demand they find me. Frankly, I don't think my sister would care because she hates me as much as ladies hate mice.
>
> Maybe I'll go out and find a lady who'd take care of me. Like the one with the deep purple umbrella or the one with the umbrella that looks like a ripe orange. We would go to the beach and panhandle to get some delicious lobster. Some nights we'll sit home and think of crazy inventions, like an automatic fish bowl cleaner or a remote control embrodery, even a contact lens for the brain.
>
> Even though it's very tempting, I'll stay so my family won't go crazy, because I know they need me.

The other painting written about by four children is "The City," by Dong Kingman, a Japanese-American watercolorist. A contemporary artist, Kingman creates a visual intensity in his work through the juxtaposition of many small areas of highly saturated color. Greg, a second grader, dictated a quite complete listing of what he saw in the painting.

> Two men are riding in a car to a store. One man is buying a paper from another man for about 50¢. There is this man looking in a window and he sees some tools. The man in the store is reading a piece of paper called "Variety." There are lots of buildings in this busy city: Studio 57, Joe's Pizza, a coffee shop right next to the big store, hot drinks and Coca Cola is right next to Studio 57. There are lots of people walking down the street on the sidewalk, looking for some more stores to buy groceries in. There is a tall building which has a red cat in the window, looking out on the busy streets. Another man is reading a piece of paper by the paperstand. There's lots of lights on the busy street: two are red, three lights are over the street to make it more clear. There is one light on the big store that is yellow and means slow down for the cars. There sure are lots of signs on the street, like for buses. There is one sign that is a hand that says, "Go right!" There's a green moon that says, "Three degrees below zero." There's a store called "Dad's Rootbeer." There's a sign with Chinese letters. There's a big sale at the big store. Shirts for $10, socks for $2.36, some pants for $5 each. And if you buy any toys, they are $2 each.

In his story, which he entitled "The Maze," fourth-grade Jeremy develops a brief episode about some people in the picture.

> The setting is New York City at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It's Friday. It's a busy day because it's payday. Can you see the men with black hats and orange shirts driving the car? They just broke into the bank down the road. They did it because they are poor. The police are unable to catch the men because the city is like a maze. With all the flashing lights and hectic traffic, it's just impossible to catch the men.

In her writing, Sandy, an eighth grader, develops some insightful comments on the nature of contemporary cities.

> People walk hurriedly from car to car, house to house, place to place in a world where confusion lurks around every corner, hides in every nook and cranny of the city engulfed in hysteria. These people live a life in which they spend all of their time being tourists in their own city. Fast food franchises pop up everywhere you look and every building contains a store so large that the

> buildings bulge out of proportion. The people in this town speak all languages. Some are panhandlers and others have so much money that they don't know what to do with it.

Two well-known artists painted the pictures chosen by six children each. The French Impressionist Edgar Degas created "In Front of the Tribune." Born in 1834, Degas, a leader of the Impressionists, was himself strongly influenced by Japanese prints, newly imported into Paris. These prints are linear, with asymmetrical composition incorporated by Degas into his work. Degas' paintings are characterized by patterns caught in some casual moment, here apparent in his painting of horses, a recurring subject. About this painting, second-grader Sarah wrote:

> There are seven people in the picture. It looks as if they are getting ready for a horse race. I can see people getting ready to watch the race. They look like they are rich. The grass is partly green and partly brown. All the horses are chestnut brown. There is a brown building in the background. There are also some green trees in the background. There are some tan jockey suits, some red suits, some green suits, and a purple suit.

In the next writing, by Alan, a fourth grader, there is effective extension beyond simply what is included in the picture, to the creation of a minimal, though effective plot.

> One summer day there were the championship horse races. The horses were just about ready for the race. The winner would get a Gold Cup and a check for $20,000. Some of the horses were a little stirred up. Then the announcer called the horses to the gate. Everyone was a little nervous. Then everyone was ready. Bang! They were off and running. The favorite was Star Spinner, number 6. Number 5 was in the lead. Number 6 was running strong and catching up to Cracker Jack, number 5. All the other horses were far behind. In the last lap number 5 and number 6 were side by side. They could see the finish line coming up. The winner was Cracker Jack, number 5. After the race the winner was awarded the money and the Cup. That evening there was a party to celebrate the victory.

In the final sample motivated by this picture, eigth-grade Vicki extends her story backward in time, to create a series of events leading up to the moment of the picture.

It's a beautiful day at the races, folks. Number seven in the red is John Trail, the selected favorite for today's race.

Although number seven is the selected favorite for today's race, my hopes are placed on Jim Man and his horse, Mr. Ed. There is a strange story to go with Mr. Ed. It happened at their first race. Mr. Ed was the selected winner and he proved this statement to be true at the quarter mile. Then at the stretch a streak of pain hit Mr. Ed's leg and he limped into last place. The people said, "Shoot him" and "Let him die in peace!"

Jim had a much different opinion. Jim decided to take Mr. Ed to a corral way out in the country to let him recuperate from his broken leg.

For five straight years Jim nursed his prize horse back to health until one day the horse stood up, trotted around, and ran like lightening. Jim continuously rode him to train him for a race. Today, folks, you see the proud Jim Man and his horse, Mr. Ed.

The other painting chosen by six child writers is "Goldfish," by the French painter Henri Matisse. Born in 1869, Matisse traveled widely, gaining an understanding of the use of color in Eastern art, of Persian miniatures, Japanese prints, and medieval glass. His work is characterized by a surface enrichment, in which calligraphic line enhances area of flat color. About his "Goldfish," Theresa, a second-grade child wrote the following:

Once upon a time there was a glass of water. And inside that glass of water lived four goldfish. Under the glass was a plate with plants on it. Under the plate was a table. Around the table were pink, red, and green flowers. There were plants all around, too.

The goldfish said, "I wonder when Sarah's going to feed us? I hope she feeds us soon because I feel sick." She felt sick not because she was hungry. It was because she was going to have a baby. She had a baby. She felt much better then. Now there were five little goldfish all in a jar.

In the next story, fourth-grade Sharon adds interest to her composition by naming the goldfish, and creating dialogue.

Once there were four goldfish. Their names were Joe, Micky, Todder, and Frank. They live in a bowl in a garden. The garden is surrounded by plants and flowers. A girl who was about ten years old comes to feed them. Every time the girl came she taught

the goldfish how to talk. At first she taught them the alphabet, then the sounds and then words. The goldfish were good at saying the words they knew. One day the girl said, "My father is now poor and needs a job." He said, "If you want to feed the goldfish, you pay for the food. So I won't be able to feed you."

Todder said, "Why don't you put up a sign saying, 'Come and see the world's only talking goldfish?'" She did that and people paid plenty to see and hear the goldfish. The girl lived happily ever after.

In the final example of writing motivated by this painting, note how eighth-grade Jon used the painting simply as a departure point, ranging far from Matisse's visual creation.

All of the goldfish you see here are an example of a very strange thing that happened in the year 247 B.C. On the night of the fish, as it was sometimes called, a very strange thing happened to four fishermen. While they were fishing, (when they weren't supposed to be because on the night of the fish nobody's supposed to harm any kind of water creature), one of their poles bent very much and then suddenly a mammoth hammerhead shark appeared! It spoke to them, saying:

"You four fishermen are fools!" "You know this night is sacred to all in every land!"

The fishermen were struck with terror! Their hearts were beating as loud and as hard as one thousand savage drums. Then the shark spoke again.

"You thought it was all a legend! But now you'll find out how much truth really is in this so-called tale!"

Then suddenly there was a mighty uproar! Just like a building being smashed to the ground! The ocean churned and foamed and brought forth 12 hideous creatures which were never before seen by man! They were all laughing and smirking in a grotesque and gory manner! They slithered and crawled around the fishermen's boat. By this time the four unfortunate anglers were only a heartbeat away from insanity! It was clawing at their minds, trying to discover a weak place by which it could enter just as an angry bear after a honeycomb in a tree it could never reach. Then the hammerhead shark uttered a deep loud word which rang throughout the whole world.

"Order!" he shouted. And the group of hideous creatures stopped their reign of terror. Then the shark continued. "I have summoned you all here for the trial of these four fishermen who disobeyed the laws of the sea!"

All was quiet on the ocean surface. Then the shark spoke again. "I say we kill them!" Then all the other creatures said, "Aye! Aye! Kill them! Kill them!"

But then one of the fishermen said, "Oh please, mighty creatures from the depths of the ocean, please spare us from death! Do anything you want to us, but please don't kill us!"

Then the shark spoke again, "Well, even though you disobeyed our laws, this is the first time that you humans survived this long, so instead of being killed, you will spend the rest of your life as a new kind of fish. It will be orange and red. Orange to remind you of the fire in the depths, and red for the blood which we spared."

So then all the creatures wailed a mighty chant and the four fishermen were changed into the fish we now call the goldfish. So whenever you see a goldfish remember, never go fishing on the night of the fish or you'll know what will happen. But wait a moment! When IS the night of the fish?

More popular than the preceding paintings was "Fishing Boats on the Beach" (Muller, pg. 40). It was chosen by seven child writers. Painted by the Dutch artist, Vincent Van Gogh, this vibrates with textures created by pigment manipulation. An impulsive use of the medium characterized the work of Van Gogh, who lived most of his life in the tranquil warmth and peace of Provence in France. About this pastorale scene, typical of the area, second-grade Peter wrote:

Four boats were on the beach. Four boats were out on the sea. The sea was rough. On the beach the sharks were watching for people to swim out to sea. Fishingmen were out at sea. The sky was dark. The fish stopped biting. The people went home.

Most often written about by second-grade students, this painting did elicit the following composition by eighth-grade Lori:

Those boats have just returned from a long, exciting trip. Sailors took them out on the calm sea to go fishing. It seemed like the perfect day, too; the sky was clear and the sun made the clear blue water sparkle like a jewel.

As the sailors pulled in their catch, the thick foam from the waves glided along the boat. The sailors were so busy pulling in their catch, they didn't notice the sky begin to cloud up and the blackness that creeped across the water.

Later it was getting worse and the wind whipped through the sails. The wind howled like a person in extreme pain and left the sails tattered.

The sailors worked quickly and cautiously to pull in their catch, but did not succeed. The incredible strength of the wind made the water pound against the boat like the beating of a drum. The boats tossed and turned and the fish were all lost.

By now the sailors were trying to save their own lives. Their hearts were beating faster than the ticking of a clock as they tried to get their boats to shore without tipping them.

Water splashed on their face as they bounced through the water. They felt they could go no longer when they sighted land. They pulled their tattered boats to shore and bounded on the soft land. They had made it safely but lost all of their day's catch.

Finally, the most popular of all the paintings was chosen by eight student writers. "The Country School"[11] was painted by the American genre painter, Winslow Homer, who found inspiration in the everyday scene. Born in 1836, Homer worked while young as a magazine illustrator, and this affected the strongly illustrative character of his later work. About this painting second-grade Lori wrote:

Once upon a time there was a little schoolhouse. There were only 12 kids not including the teacher. I think that it is reading time because everybody is reading. I bet they have a super time at recess time because it's so beautiful. I think a little boy is crying because he can't pronounce a word. The teacher saw someone doing something wrong and is giving him a hard stare. Someone brought the teacher flowers today. Perhaps it was her secret admirer.

In the next composition, eighth-grade Carol chose to narrate a brief episode as if she were one of the characters.

As I walk into this new school, I notice a lot of different and new things. I am a rich young girl and am used to being in a very trim, well dusted schoolroom. We just moved to these parts.

What I see is a one-room school, much like a large outhouse, only without the main features. I see an invisible hatrack because the teacher's hat is hanging above the blackboard against the wall.

The girls and the boys are on opposite sides as if they are unable to sit together because of talking. There were wooden benches. They must have just been made because I could smell the fresh scent but could not see any trees.

I noticed that most of the class was reading so I decided to be very quiet walking over to the teacher. She turned her head from giving two of the students their assignments and said, "You

must be our new student. Class, meet your new classmate." She said to me, "Will you please tell us about yourself?" So I began, "My name is Elisabeth Kendal. I came from Michigan."

The teacher said, "O.K." and asked the class to get back with their studies. She told me her name, gave me my books, homework and my assigned seat. But all I could think of was, "What a new and different school."

A final example is the following composition, the product of a gifted fourth grade writer. Notice how Katy creates incident and dialogue, while managing to keep straight an array of characters for a length of time, yielding a truly impressive composition.

". . . So, can anyone tell me the answer to this problem?" asked the teacher. All twelve hands went up. The teacher looked at the three girls sitting closest to her desk.

"Melissa Arden and Linda Pencok, go back to your places," said the teacher.

"Yes, Miss Brown," said the two girls. They moved back to their places.

"Now, can anyone tell me the answer to this problem?" asked Miss Brown.

Melissa raised her hand. "Yes, Melissa."

"Two thousand, four hundred, thirty-six," Melissa said proudly. "Incorrect," said Miss Brown sharply. The class laughed; Melissa blushed.

Finally, school was out. Linda, Melissa, and the other little girl, Sara, walked home together.

"Bye, Lissa," said Sara and Linda in unison.

"Bye!" Melissa's reply floated behind her.

Melissa ran into her house. It was a small house. There were only two bedrooms for the eight children of the Arden family.

As Melissa came into the kitchen, her older sister, Charlotte, said, "Lissa, Mother wants you to do your homework right now!"

"Don't bug Lissa, Lottie," said Clara, coming into the kitchen. "She doesn't know yet."

"Know what? Tell me, Lottie! Tell me, Clara!" yelled Melissa quite suddenly.

"Sh! You'll wake up Jacky," said Clara, pouring a glass of milk.

Bang, bang, bang, bang! came down the stairs. The girls exchanged quick glances. Then they spun around so fast their dress skirts swirled and their long blondish-brown hair whipped across their faces.

"Hello!" said Jacky cheerfully as he ran into the kitchen.

Melissa sighed. This definitely was not a well behaved boy. Not in the year 1864. At a later date, perhaps, but not now.

"Jacky"started Charlotte reproachfully. "Aw, let him have some fun," said Janet, bouncing into the kitchen. "Fun! No one in this house has fun," said Karen, bouncing in behind Janet.

Just then Mother walked in. "What in heavens is the noise about?"

"Hello, Mama," chorused all the children in unison.

"Hello, darlings." She looked at them. Charlotte, her eldest, was fourteen already. And, Clara, the next one is thirteen. Then there is Janet, who is twelve, and Karen, eleven. And Tillie, ten years old, and Melissa, nine. And Jennie starting school this year, is five. And Jacky, four. "What will I do with him?"

"Children, we are going over to the schoolhouse, now. Where are Tillie and Jennie?"

"Playing in the brook last time I saw them," said Charlotte.

"Well, go get them, Clara. Have you told them yet?"

Clara blushed and hung her head.

"Never mind. I'll tell them," said Mother.

"What, what? What's going on!? Tell us!" said Karen and Janet and Melissa.

"We are going to help add to the schoolhouse, so Clara and Charlotte and you two, Janet and Karen, can get some more education."

"But we don't want to, Mama" complained Karen.

"No more of that. No, come on." They followed Mother obediently. Melissa turned at the sound of a yell: "Tillllllie and Jennnnnie! You get out of that mud right now!"

Charlotte appeared holding Tillie and Jennie, soaking wet, with mud on their school dresses.

When they got to the schoolhouse, they saw piles of lumber and men hammering on extra boards. The schoolhouse already looked larger.

Melissa climbed up on a pile. She was very high up. She could see everything! Wow!

Wait a minute. How was she going to get down? Oh, no! She couldn't get down! Eeeeeeeeeks!

Then Father, who was working there, saw her and brought her down.

The next day, when Sara, Linda and Melissa were walking to school, they stopped short. In front of them was the school, but it was so big!

They went in and saw it had an extra room. They peeked in.

Charlotte, Clara, and Janet and Karen were there!

At lunchtime the whole family (except Jacky and Sara and Linda) ate lunch together. This was fun. Every day they could do this! They had a new schoolhouse!

Conclusions

What inferences can we draw about the painting children chose, and about the effectiveness of this method as a stimulus to writing?

The Kuhn, a sombre and introspective painting, was chosen only once. It provides little in the way of specific clues to spark writing. The hard-edged Leger, full of bright color, nonetheless also attracted only one child writer.

The boldly patterned Picasso woodcut attracted only two young writers. The other Picasso, a more subtle, yet melancholy oil, was also not a popular choice.

The Manet painting was one of four, each of which attracted three writers. Children writing about it may have responded because they live in an area where boats are commonplace, or perhaps because of the pleasant brightness of the palette. In Seurat's painting, the subject is common enough. The formality of the figures did not seem to discourage child writers. The most abstract painting of the set is by Chagall, and three children chose it despite the lack of objective reality. In contrast to the Chagall, three children also chose an extremely realistic painting by Robert Henri. Why did they choose to write about it, while "The White Clown," by Walt Kuhn did not attract writers? In each there is one central figure with no indication of background. Was this more popular because the color is brighter, or because the subject is a child, instead of an adult as in the Kuhn?

Even more popular was the painting by Maurice Prendergast, despite the fact that the costumes and the architecture establish an ambiance quite unlike life today. Equally popular was the upbeat watercolor by Dong Kingman. Its kinetic capturing of the city pulse attracted four child writers.

Edgar Degas' momentary painting of a horse race attracted six child writers, perhaps because of the subject, as the subtleties of the artist's technique are not easily accessible. It is easier to understand why the brightly colored and heavily patterned painting by Matisse attracted six writers. The similarities between this consciously naive art and the art of children is readily apparent.

With an unusually calm Van Gogh we are back to a painting done in a subtle palette. The subject of the painting may have been a determining factor when the seven children authors chose it.

The most often chosen painting was a very realistically represented historic scene, an idealized view of school as adults remember it. Was this chosen most frequently because it is about a school? Or was it perhaps chosen because both in subject and in tonality it is highly representative?

Children were not questioned in this small experiment about their reason for choosing. They were simply asked to pick a painting they liked and write about it. Research on picture preference and indeed research on composition are relatively new endeavors. Because I was interested in getting some insights into both, we used reproductions of paintings as a motivation for writing. These results, stories children wrote after choosing a favorite picture, are not conclusive. No generalizations can be drawn from such a limited sample. Yet, perhaps this has illustrated the great untapped potential of great art to motivate writing. Won't you try it, and see how it works for you?

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